

# *The Power of the Situation*

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*Social Influence and Group Processes ♦ Channel Factors*

In Europe a few years ago, hundreds of angry British soccer fans attacked and killed scores of Italian fans. Though we recoil from such behavior and denounce it, we do not understand it. We tend to assimilate such behavior to the case of individual aggression, failing to recognize that the situation that results in mob violence has properties that cannot be predicted from ordinary life situations or from knowledge of the life histories of the participants.

Indeed, it was these observations, as Allport (1954) noted in his classic review of social psychology's origins, that prompted social philosophers such as Tarde (1903) and LeBon (1896) to recognize the need for a level of analysis that goes beyond individual needs and traits. The mob situation, they noted, seems at once to energize the individual participants and to rob them of the rationality and sense of propriety that otherwise guide their behavior. Collectively, the actors willingly, even eagerly, behave in ways that would cause shame and embarrassment were they alone. We see contemporary demonstrations of "deindividuated" behavior in urban riots and racial harassment and, less ominously, in students' end-of-term revelries on the beaches of Florida and California; we also see them in New Orleans' Mardi Gras, Rio's Carnival, and similar celebration periods in which the devout traditionally can abandon customary constraints without fear of censure.

What accounts for such happenings? Is it simple excitement and arousal? Or is it the sense of anonymity, or the diffusion of responsibility, or the diminished likelihood of punishment? Or is it, as nineteenth-century social philosophers thought, that the mob somehow releases some mysterious source of energy? Teasing apart such determinants has continued to be a fascinating research topic (cf. Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952; Singer, Brush, & Lublin, 1965; Zajonc, 1965; Zimbardo, 1970). Whatever their origin, lynch mobs, marauding juvenile bands, and soccer fans run amok all powerfully illustrate the situa-

tional control of behavior. And when such events occur, they inevitably tempt us to commit the fundamental attribution error of explaining exclusively in dispositional terms what ought to be understood largely in situational terms. For few of us can contemplate such instances of collective abandon without feeling that neither we ourselves, nor our friends and neighbors, nor, for that matter, any other decent members of our society would have succumbed to the group influences. We believe, accordingly, that those who did succumb revealed thereby something irretrievably unbalanced and malevolent about their personal dispositions.

This chapter's review of classic studies of social influence and situational control will emphasize two themes: first, that social pressures and other situational factors exert effects on behavior that are more potent than we generally recognize, and second, that to understand the impact of a given social situation, we often need to attend to its subtle details.

## SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND GROUP PROCESSES

### *Uniformity Pressures in the Laboratory: Sherif's "Autokinetic" Studies and the Asch Paradigm*

We begin our discussion with a set of experiments that provides the best-known and probably the most compelling laboratory demonstrations of group influence and conformity—the famous experiments of Solomon Asch. It is ironic that these particular experiments have come to be cited as perhaps the ultimate demonstration of the individual's mindless surrender to the dictates of the group. For, at least initially, Asch sought to demonstrate precisely the opposite. In particular, Asch wanted to clear up what he believed to be a misconception fostered by an imaginative and seminal set of experiments conducted some years earlier by an unorthodox young psychologist named Muzafer Sherif, a recent immigrant to the United States from Turkey.

**Sherif's "Autokinetic Effect" Paradigm.** Sherif's experiments (Sherif, 1937) had been designed to illustrate the development and perpetuation of group norms. His subjects, believing themselves to be participants in a rather esoteric psychophysics experiment, found themselves seated in a completely darkened room with a pinpoint of light located at some distance in front of them. (They could not be certain of the exact distance; indeed, they were not even aware of the dimensions of the room. The absence of any such objective "frame of reference," in fact, was an important requirement for the demonstration to follow.) After a few moments of gazing directly at the point of light, the subjects sud-

denly saw it "move" and then disappear. Shortly thereafter, a new point of light appeared, moved, and again disappeared, a sequence that continued until a great many such "trials" had been completed. In reality, however, the stationary light only seemed to move, for the apparent movement was a perceptual illusion called the "autokinetic effect."

Sherif gave his subjects a simple task. On each trial they were merely to estimate how far the light had moved. When the task was performed by single subjects, these estimates were highly variable from one individual to the next (that is, ranging from an inch or so to several feet) and, at least initially, rather unstable from one trial to the next. However, when subjects performed the task in pairs or groups of three, the result was quite different. The subjects' estimates invariably began to converge, and a group norm quickly developed. Moreover, while different groups converged on quite different norms, the members of any particular duo or trio seemed reluctant to offer estimates that diverged substantially from the standard of their particular group. Lacking any objective basis for evaluating the appropriateness of individual judgments, the group members had substituted a social basis.

In one study Sherif introduced a confederate—something that no participant could have suspected in those innocent times when deception experiments were virtually unknown. This confederate, participating along with one naive subject, gave estimates that were either consistently much higher or consistently much lower than those typically made by subjects left to make judgments on their own. The subject quickly adopted the high or low standard of the confederate, a result showing that social norms did not have to evolve from the converging views of well-meaning but uncertain truth seekers; instead, they could be imposed by an individual who had no coercive power and no special claim to expertise or legitimacy, only a willingness to be consistent and unwavering in the face of others' uncertainty.

Additional results reported by Sherif and subsequent investigators further drove home this message. Once formed, regardless of whether imposed by confederates or arrived at by group convergence, autokinetic norms readily became internalized. Subjects would adhere to such norms even when their peers were no longer present to witness their judgments (and presumably, to approve or disapprove of them), and they would remain true to them even a year later (Rohrer, Baron, Hoffman, & Swinder, 1954)! Subjects would even remain true to "old" norms when they found themselves participating in new groups made up of peers who offered very different judgments. In fact, as Jacobs and Campbell (1961) showed many years later, autokinetic norms could be readily transmitted from one "generation" of subjects to the next. After each set of trials in this study, a fresh, naive subject was introduced and another retired, so that after a short while all the participants were new to the situation but nevertheless adhering closely to a group norm that

had been handed down to them over several generations—long after the original imposer of the norm had passed from the scene.

Sherif's implicit message, however, was not simply that in the face of uncertainty or ambiguity people give weight to the judgments of their peers. Rather, it was that our most basic perceptions and judgments about the world are socially conditioned and dictated. And it was precisely this radical suggestion that Solomon Asch, long a student both of perception and of social influence processes (Asch, 1940), initially sought to challenge by replacing the "autokinetic" paradigm with an experimental procedure that now bears his name (Asch, 1951, 1952, 1955, 1956).

**The Asch Paradigm.** Upon their arrival at the laboratory, Asch's subjects, like Sherif's, were told that they were about to participate in an experiment on visual perception. Participating in groups of seven to nine persons, they were to undergo a number of trials requiring them to indicate which of three "comparison" lines displayed at the front of the room matched a so-called standard line. Each person answered in turn. As every undergraduate who has taken introductory psychology now knows, however, only one of the participants—the one designated to respond last on each judgment trial—was a naive subject. All the others were confederates of the experimenter whose judgments followed a prearranged script.

At the outset, participants were told that experimental considerations required that they not communicate with each other and that they make their judgments independently. But neither this instruction nor the other procedural details initially seemed very important because the judgments the subjects were required to make proved to be extremely easy—so easy, in fact, that they found the first couple of trials boring and a little pointless, as all nine participants, in order, repeated the "obvious" correct answer. Then, on the fourth trial, the subjects saw something very peculiar happen. Although this trial was no more difficult than the preceding ones, the first judge, with no hesitation or expression of indecision, offered a patently wrong answer. Instead of correctly "matching" the 1.5-inch standard line with a comparison line of the same length, this first judge opted for a comparison line only 0.5 inches long. (The remaining choice was 2 inches.) Inevitably, the subject's reaction was one of wide-eyed disbelief, a quick double check to make certain that the judge's response was as off-base as it seemed, and often a nervous giggle or some other expression of vicarious discomfort at his peer's folly. These feelings of disbelief and discomfort, however, were soon to be greatly heightened and to take on a different quality as the other group members all followed suit and repeated the same wrong answer. At last it was the lone subject's turn to answer and, in so doing, to decide whether to conform to the unanimous majority or to remain independent.

Before the experiment was over, there were to be (depending on the particular study) from 5 to 12 such "critical" conformity trials embedded within a total of 10 to 18 trials. Each critical trial confronted subjects with the same dilemma—either to conform, and thereby deny the evidence of their senses, or else to remain independent in the face of a unanimous, seemingly confident majority. Asch, it is worth noting, initially expected that the vast majority of his subjects would show the courage of their convictions (or at least the confidence of their perceptions) by remaining independent in the face of the unanimous majority. This expectation proved to be incorrect, however. Notwithstanding the simple and concrete nature of the perceptual judgment task, subjects typically manifested obvious conflict and discomfort, and not infrequently, they conformed. In fact, anywhere from 50 percent to 80 percent of the subjects (the actual proportion varied from study to study) yielded to the erroneous majority at least once, and overall, conformity occurred on over a third of all critical trials.

In follow-up studies, Asch quickly discovered two important facts. First, the size of the unanimous majority in his paradigm did not have to be particularly large. Indeed, Asch found that conformity rates did not decrease significantly when the number of confederates was reduced from eight to a number as small as three or four. (It is worth noting, in light of Sherif's earlier results, that a group consisting of a subject and two confederates prompted relatively little conformity; and when only a single confederate was employed, there was virtually no evidence of social influence at all.) On the other hand, the erroneous majority did have to be unanimous. When the target subject was provided with a single ally who remained independent, both the percentage of conforming subjects and the frequency with which they conformed dropped precipitously—even when the naive subject and the ally were confronted with seven or eight judges who all expressed a different opinion.

Although initially surprised, Asch was never tempted to conclude that basic perceptions of physical reality can be socially dictated. To defend his position, Asch pointed out that roughly a third of his subjects had never conformed at all, and that another third had defied the unanimous majority more often than they had yielded. More importantly, he insisted (using postexperimental interviews to buttress his case) that when conformity had occurred in the face of social influence, it was not because the subjects' perceptions had been altered. On the contrary, the subjects had conformed despite their private perceptions, either because they believed that their perceptions must be somehow wrong and those of the unanimous majority correct, or because they were unwilling to be a lone dissenter even when they were quite certain that the majority was wrong.

While Asch's interpretations were convincing and his follow-up studies enlightening, it was his basic empirical result—the willingness

of so many individuals to deny even the unambiguous evidence of their senses rather than stand alone against the group—that captured the imagination of Asch's contemporaries and that continues to challenge us today. Social psychologists of the 1950s were quick to relate Asch's findings to the real world. The era was one of seemingly unprecedented political and social orthodoxy—of McCarthyism and loyalty oaths, of homogeneous middle-class suburbs and lockstep corporate culture. Few could have anticipated the conflicts and social confrontation that would begin with the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s and reach a climax in protests against America's role in the Vietnam War. Social critics of the 1950s complained about the relative paucity of dissent and the high price paid by dissenters. They lamented the loss of the independence and rugged individualism that they believed had characterized an earlier America; and they railed at the corporate and suburban blandness of the "man in the grey flannel suit" coming home each night to his well-scrubbed, right-thinking, consumerist brood. To such critics, the Asch experiment seemed to be a cautionary tale about the dangers of peer pressure.

Within the field of social psychology, especially among the Lewinians who were beginning to explore principles of group dynamics and social influence, the Asch experiments were employed as an argument about the potency of "pressures to uniformity." Substantial conformity could be shown to occur even in the Asch situation—a situation in which the ease and objectivity of the task and the relative absence of group power to reward or punish should have served to minimize conformity pressures. Therefore (so the argument went) could we not expect even greater conformity to occur in everyday situations in which ambiguous matters of opinion are discussed by group members who have reason to respect each other's judgment and fear each other's censure?

Like all classic experiments that challenge our intuitions and preconceptions, the Asch experiments prompt questions about generalizability and significance. Were Asch's results artifacts of the social psychology laboratory, irrelevant to the way social influence works in the real world? And even if they were not laboratory artifacts, what do they really teach us about the explanation, prediction, and control of human behavior?

It has long since been established that Asch's basic findings are not artifacts of a hothouse laboratory situation. We know, thanks to Stanley Milgram (whose own classic experiment will be explored in similar detail shortly), that the massive effects demonstrated by Asch do not depend on the use of college students, or even on the subjects' awareness that they are taking part in a psychology experiment. Milgram (1961) looked at the responses of adults who believed that they were being hired to test a new signaling system for jet airliners. In that context, the target subject was asked to judge the pitch of comparison tones relative

to that of a standard tone. On a number of critical trials the target subject was faced with the prospect of conforming or remaining independent after the preceding judges (who, of course, were confederates of the experimenter) all matched the standard tone with one that seemed manifestly higher or lower in pitch. As in Asch's original experiment, the main finding was the high degree of conformity to the erroneous majority. This result, therefore, should effectively silence any skeptics who would insist that the Asch findings would not apply in real-world situations in which judges believe that their incorrect answers might have some consequences.

Questions about the broader theoretical significance of Asch's findings require a rather more complicated answer. We certainly know that massive conformity effects can be obtained with many other types of stimuli, including mathematical problems, general-knowledge items, and social and political judgments (Crutchfield, 1955). Indeed, follow-up studies to the original Asch experiments increasingly turned from the use of simple objective stimuli to matters of subjective interpretation and opinion. This was done because such judgments seemed more relevant to everyday conformity, because the studies were easier to do and more certain to yield large amounts of conformity, and because they somehow seemed less denigrating to the subjects. These studies demonstrated again and again that arbitrarily constructed groups, even ones that hold no long-term power to reward conformity or punish dissent, can exert potent conformity pressures.

On the other hand, the ease of demonstrating massive conformity should not prompt us to conclude from the Asch phenomenon that people are sheep, that they are somehow dispositionally inclined to join the majority chorus rather than allow their discordant note to stand out. Although more or less the conventional view of Asch's contemporaries, such a conclusion would reflect the fundamental attribution error we decry throughout this book. To rebut the "people are sheep" interpretation, we need only remind the reader, as Asch did, that most of his subjects, most of the time, did not conform. We also must note how drastically conformity in the Asch situation declined when the majority, even a very large majority, was not unanimous. Both of these results suggest that people often are quite willing to express a minority view. At worst, they find dissent difficult when they have no comrades who will do likewise. But we don't need laboratory findings to prove that people can and do dissent in the face of pressure to conform. We can all cite cases in which we ourselves, or others with whom we are familiar, have willingly expressed dissenting opinions—indeed, done so under circumstances where the potential cost of dissent would seem, at least at first consideration, to have been considerably greater than any that might have been anticipated by potential dissenters in the Asch situation.

The question of when, and why, people are willing to dissent was pursued by Ross, Bierbrauer, and Hoffman (1976), who analyzed the Asch situation in terms of the participants' causal attributions. Essentially, Ross and his colleagues argued, people who must choose between conformity and dissent almost always can cite reasons for their differing views. They can point to differences in goals, incentives, available information, or prior suppositions, differences that both would cause rational people to disagree and allow them to justify that disagreement. The Asch situation, by contrast, was unique in that it offered potential dissenters no way of accounting for their peers' apparently erroneous but unanimous judgment. To the subjects, the correct judgment appeared so obvious that only fools or mad people could err, and they had every reason to assume that the right answer appeared equally obvious to their peers. Accordingly, by dissenting, they ran the risk of appearing incompetent or even crazy. At best, their dissent promised to be as incomprehensible to their peers as their peers' judgments were to them. Their own dissent, in fact, would represent a challenge to the collective competence of their peers—a challenge one is particularly loath to offer when one's own ability to make sense of one's world suddenly seems to be in question.

To test this attributional analysis, Ross and his colleagues recreated a version of the Asch situation in which subjects made simple judgments about the relative lengths of two tones. They showed that subjects became much more willing to dissent on critical trials when there were different consequences for being wrong in one way than in the other. Subjects knew that on critical trials the apparently incorrect judgment, if it happened to be correct, would yield a high payoff for the individual who made it, whereas the apparently correct judgment would yield only a very low payoff. There was a substantial decrease in conformity in this situation. Ross and his colleagues argued that this occurred because the introduction of an asymmetric payoff matrix on critical trials provided a plausible explanation for the apparent disagreement. Subjects could reason that "their judgment, but not mine, was distorted by the prospect of a large payoff instead of a small one," or even that "they apparently thought it was worth playing a long shot; I don't." In other words, the introduction of the asymmetric matrix eliminated the most distinctive and potent feature of the Asch situation, which is the total absence of any suitable way for the naive subjects to explain the apparent discrepancy in perception.

Pondering the meaning of the Asch studies and of the factors that influence conformity remains a fresh and interesting activity even for psychologists long familiar with the work. But regardless of the interpretations preferred for the various findings by different psychologists, all are agreed that Asch's research represents one of the most stunning demonstrations we have of the remarkable power of situations to elicit

behavior that most of us are sure we ourselves would never resort to—public conformity to the views expressed by others even when we privately hold utterly different views.

### *The Bennington Studies*

A second classic set of social influence studies takes us outside the laboratory, and beyond the subtle details of particular experimental paradigms, to the familiar problem of political persuasion. As everyone knows, it is notoriously difficult to change someone's political views. Media campaigns do sometimes succeed, of course, but rarely if ever do they do so by altering the basic political views of the electorate. They may effectively showcase the candidate's personal vigor, capacity for leadership, or compassion; or they may take the low road and impugn the reputation of an opponent. But the fact remains that campaigns produce few genuine political conversions. Even the most artfully constructed rhetorical appeals rarely persuade conservatives to vote for candidates or ballot initiatives that they perceive to be liberal, or vice versa, much less persuade the voters to change their basic ideologies. In fact, most successful political campaigns do not even try to change the electorate's view. Instead, they try to win over the "undecided" vote, and then concentrate on identifying their supporters and making sure that they get out and cast their ballots on election day.

It is against this background of political wisdom, buttressed by the results of many empirical studies on the stability of voting habits (for example, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947) and the more general failure of mass media campaigns to change social and political attitudes (for example, McGuire, 1986; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985) that we invite the reader to consider the results of the famous Bennington Study conducted by Theodore Newcomb in the late 1930s (Newcomb, 1943). The basic findings of the study can be summarized quite simply. Young women from predominantly upper-middle-class families entered Bennington College between 1935 and 1939, sharing the generally conservative Republican political views and voting preferences of their parents. Within a couple of years, after having been exposed to the Bennington milieu, the students' views and preferences had shifted far to the left of those of their family members and of most other Americans of their social class.

The results of a campus straw poll for the presidential election of 1936 offered particularly compelling testimony to these changes. In that year, President Roosevelt's reelection campaign faced challenges both from the Republicans who were critical of his liberal New Deal policies and from Socialist and Communist candidates who were enjoying considerable success in persuading Depression-weary Americans that even

more radical changes were necessary. Among the first-year Bennington students, newly arrived on campus at the time of the election, over 60 percent supported the Republican (Landon), while fewer than 30 percent supported the incumbent Democratic President (Roosevelt), and fewer than 10 percent supported either the Socialist (Thomas) or the Communist (Browder). These voting preference percentages (including, remarkably, the nontrivial level of support enjoyed by the two radical candidates) reflected those of the students' affluent parents and others of their social class. Among sophomores, who had then been at Bennington a little over a year, the leftward shift was already quite evident. Landon and Roosevelt enjoyed roughly equal levels of support (43 percent), and the two radical candidates split the support of the remaining 14 percent. Among juniors and seniors the shift was even more dramatic. Only 15 percent supported Landon (the candidate favored by the clear majority of their parents), about 54 percent supported Roosevelt, and more than 30 percent chose one of the two radicals.

These voting percentages, along with many other measures collected by Newcomb over the four years of the study, illustrate that the social situation can produce a monumental shift in the basic social and political attitudes of a great many people—a change of the sort that is rarely produced in anyone by speeches, newspaper articles, or debates. It is notable, furthermore, that these changes occurred in the face of opposing family attitudes and values, and in the face of the sort of “objective” factors relating to economic self-interest and class interest that Marxist scholars emphasize so heavily. What is most remarkable of all, perhaps, is the degree to which the converts continued to show liberal preferences long after they had departed from Bennington. More than 20 years later, in the 1960 election, when John Kennedy received scant support from other well-to-do Protestant college graduates in the Northeast (30 percent is a generous estimate, according to Newcomb), roughly 60 percent of the Bennington 1935–1939 graduates voted for Kennedy. When asked to describe their present political views, over 65 percent said that on most issues they were “liberal” or “left of center,” while only about 16 percent labeled themselves “conservatives,” (the remainder described themselves as “middle of the road”). In short, political alliances continued to reflect the influence of the Bennington reference groups (Newcomb, Koenig, Flacks, & Warwick, 1967).

Newcomb's findings allowed him to offer a number of important observations about the Bennington environment and to test several specific hypotheses about social influence. We learn that the Bennington of the 1930s was an exciting, close-knit community, self-sufficient and isolated in important respects from the surrounding community. The professors were young, dynamic, politically liberal, and determined to increase the social awareness and involvement of the economically

privileged young women they encountered inside and outside the classroom. *Esprit de corps* was strong, and there was clear evidence of group pressures to uniformity, in particular, pressures to the Bennington norms of liberalism and activism. Newcomb showed that politically active liberal students were more likely than conservatives to be chosen for friendship by others and more likely to be selected for positions of leadership and recognition. The liberals clearly formed a kind of in-group, leading to a change in the student body that in some respects constituted a full-fledged social movement. For many, perhaps most, of the incoming students, their Bennington classmates came to be a primary reference group whose acceptance and approval was eagerly sought and whose values were internalized. For a minority, this did not happen; they remained aloof and largely unchanged in their attitudes, perhaps (as Newcomb suggests) because they remained tied to their families and were insulating themselves against possible conflict and disapproval.

Newcomb's analysis heavily emphasized the adaptive social function of the students' political conversions—that is, the relation of their newly adopted liberalism or radicalism to their desire for social approval. As Asch (1952) and others later observed, too little attention, perhaps, was given to cognitive aspects, for the Bennington students were obviously thinking, and talking, about the momentous events occurring in the world around them as America struggled with the Great Depression and the Nazis consolidated their power and prepared for war in Europe. It is not at all clear that just any political orthodoxy could have been so successfully imposed by the group and the opinion leaders who inspired it. But it is at least clear that the social situation at Bennington—group cohesion, relative isolation from competing influences, and, of course, pressures to uniformity enforced by the promise of social acceptance and the threat of rejection—was a necessary feature of the students' leftward movement. For the same world events and the same arguments about the need for greater social justice and economic reform had relatively little influence on siblings and peers who faced different social pressures within different social settings.

Separating the various strains of the Bennington story, and others like it—that is, exploring the nature of group pressures, the relevance of social isolation, and the sources and significance of group cohesiveness—became a major undertaking for psychologists of the 1950s. In field studies (notably Festinger et al., 1950; also Siegal & Siegal, 1957) and later in countless laboratory experiments (for example, Back, 1951; Schachter, 1951), new standards of sophistication and rigor were brought to bear, as psychologists demonstrated that they could successfully disentangle and investigate many of the complex social processes that occur in group settings. At the same time, however, Muzafer Sherif

was hard at work on a set of field studies that could be traced to a very different intellectual tradition, and it is to these studies that we next turn our attention.

### *Sherif's Studies of Intergroup Competition and Conflict*

Sherif's social influence studies derived from the ideas of an important nineteenth-century situationist whose impact on the social sciences was felt far less in psychology than in political science, economics, and sociology. The situationist in question was Karl Marx, who, over a century ago (Marx, 1859/1904), noted that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their social being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (p. 10). Mindful of this Marxist tenet, Sherif returned to the task of showing the social basis for individual perceptions and judgments, a task he had begun with his autokinetic effect studies a generation earlier. This time he undertook a classic series of field experiments on intergroup conflict.

The object of Sherif's three experiments (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif, White, & Harvey, 1955; Sherif et al., 1961) was a demonstration that intergroup hostility and negative perceptions are not inevitable consequences arising from the very existence of diverse social groupings. Instead, Sherif and his colleagues insisted, hostile sentiments and actions arise from intergroup competition for scarce resources and from other real or perceived conflicts of interest. Moreover, when intergroup relations become cooperative rather than competitive, and the actions of one group begin to further rather than to frustrate the goals of the other, intergroup relations may cease to be negative.

To test this situationist thesis, Sherif and company for a number of years undertook the task of running a summer camp in which they could manipulate the relationship between groups and then measure the resulting changes in intergroup sentiments and behavior. The essential features of their three best-known experiments were similar. The campers—all white, middle-class boys about 12 years old, who were unacquainted prior to the three-week session—found themselves assigned to one of two different cabins. In an initial phase of the study, there was little interaction between the two groups created by this assignment. Each group engaged in craft and sports activities (and developed the kinds of internal social structures and evolved the group symbols, rituals, jargons and other norms for appropriate behavior) that would be typical of any middle-class American summer camp. In a second phase, the groups were introduced to a series of intergroup contests (baseball, football, treasure hunt, and tug of war) with the promise of a trophy and individual prizes (for example, a new penknife) for

those in the winning group, but nothing save frustration and dismay for the losers.

After the competition was over, and its effects on attitudes and behavior had been documented, the third phase of the experiment began. Instead of vying for rewards that one group could gain only at the expense of the other, the two groups now found themselves in a variety of circumstances in which they not only shared a single, "superordinate" goal but found that the goal could only be obtained by intergroup cooperation. In the most dramatic instance, the two groups, away on a joint outing, found that the camp truck had broken down. As a result, they would be able to return to camp for their noontime meal only if the truck could somehow be started—an outcome they accomplished by all pulling together on a rope attached to the truck's front bumper (the same rope, not coincidentally, that had been the instrument of their previous tug-of-war competition!).

The results of this short-term longitudinal field study were clear and compelling. While the physical separation of the campers into separate groups led to a network of in-group friendships, and even a tendency to rate one's own group somewhat more favorably than the other, it did not produce negative relationships between the two groups. Intergroup derogation and hostility began only when the groups competed for a scarce resource. Through informal observation, and through a number of cleverly designed little experiments presented as games, the investigators were able to demonstrate that the norm of peaceful coexistence vanished as the competition began and heated up. The two groups lost little opportunity to engage in name-calling, downgrading of each other's abilities, and even overtly displaying aggression. By the time the competition was over, the groups insisted they wanted nothing more to do with each other. During the same period, in-group solidarity increased, and physical toughness came to be more highly prized. In short, intergroup competition proved a sufficient condition for the rise of intergroup hostility. While cultural and observable physical differences between groups may facilitate hostility, Sherif concluded, differences of this sort were not a necessary condition for the development of such hostility.

Equally important, from Sherif's viewpoint, was the demonstration that intergroup conflict could be reduced by the introduction of superordinate goals and the initiation of cooperative ventures to achieve those goals. Once again, informal observations and mini-experiments illustrated the changes in sentiments and the development of friendships between erstwhile rivals and even former enemies. Sherif took particular pains to point out that such gains were neither immediate nor inevitable—the first cooperative ventures undertaken did not break down the "us" and "them" orientation of the groups. Sherif also could



not resist mentioning that mere informational campaigns, even those couched in appeals to moral values, were universally unsuccessful in reducing enmity. Sunday religious services that interrupted the period of competition with especially pointed appeals for brotherly love, forgiveness of enemies, and cooperation had no impact. The campers solemnly departed from the services and then, within minutes, returned to their preoccupation with defeating or harassing the detested out-group. It was only changes in the type of interdependence existing between groups that produced a change in intergroup attitudes and behavior.

Social scientists of the 1950s could not miss the relevance of Sherif's demonstrations to contemporary problems of religious, ethnic, and especially, racial prejudice. His results offered encouragement to proponents of desegregation in housing, employment, and education and, at the same time, sounded a cautionary note about the value of "mere contact"—that is, contact without any cooperative pursuit (perhaps one should add *successful* pursuit) of shared goals (Cook, 1957, 1979, 1985; Deutsch & Collins, 1951; Gerard & Miller, 1975; Pettigrew, 1971, 1986).

It is worth noting that the last two decades have seen a rather intriguing challenge to at least one aspect of Sherif's theorizing. Henry Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel, 1970, 1981; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) have sought to demonstrate that "mere categorization" of people into different nominal groups, even in the absence of any close relationship among group members, can elicit favoritism toward in-group members and discrimination toward out-group members. In one study, for example, children assigned to one of two "minimal groups" (on the basis of their alleged preference for the paintings either of Klee or Kandinsky) were given the task of allocating money to various in-group and out-group members whose specific identity they did not know. The main findings from this study, which have been proven to be remarkably robust in conceptual replications conducted in several different countries, was a significant (albeit slight) tendency to reward in-group members more highly than out-group members. In other words, even the most arbitrary and seemingly inconsequential group classifications can provide a basis for discriminatory behavior. The findings of Tajfel and others have prompted critics to complain about artificiality (owing to the use of paper-and-pencil measures of reward allocation) and sparked heated debate about their real-world relevance and proper interpretation. (See review by R. Brown, 1986, pp. 543–551.) But these studies do suggest that the tendency to view the world in terms of "we" and "they," with at least a working hypothesis that "we" are somehow better and more deserving, is a rather basic aspect of social perception. They also suggest the anti-Marxist hypothesis that subjective aspects of social life, and not merely material, objective ones, can play an important role in social relations. We will return to this issue in

Chapter 7, when we discuss the effects on social behavior both of the objective situation and of subjective aspects of culture.

### *Inhibition of Bystander Intervention*

Some of the best and most interesting studies in the situationist tradition established by Lewin derive, at least initially, not from broad theories but from careful analysis of real-world events. The classic bystander intervention studies conducted two decades ago by John Darley and Bibb Latané provide perhaps the best-known examples of this tradition.

The 1960s were filled with events that made many feel that America's social fabric was unraveling. What caught the eye of Darley and Latané, however, was a rash of attacks on women in which no one came to the victim's aid. One such incident in particular received great national attention. Over a 30-minute period in Kew Gardens, a middle-class section of Queens, New York, a woman named Kitty Genovese was stabbed repeatedly by an assailant. Though she shouted for help continually during that time, and despite the fact (as police later were able to establish) that at least 38 people heard her and were aware of the incident, no one intervened in any way. No one even called the police!

The news media, never at a loss to explain human behavior, were unanimous in attributing the neighbors' lack of intervention to increasing alienation and apathy among dwellers in the megalopolis. Darley and Latané, trained in the situationist and subjectivist traditions of their field, thought otherwise. They hypothesized that in this incident, and in scores of others in which groups of bystanders failed to help victims of accidents, illnesses, or crimes (even in circumstances that would have exposed them to no danger or other significant costs), potential altruists had been inhibited not by indifference but rather by important aspects of the social situation. In particular, they had been inhibited by the presence of other potential altruists, and by their apparent failure to intervene in the same situation.

Group situations, Darley and Latané argued, can inhibit bystander intervention in two ways. First, and most obvious, is the dilution or diffusion of responsibility that each person feels because of the presence of others ("Why should I be the one to intervene, especially if no one else is? I'd be willing to do my share, but not to take on all the responsibility myself"). Second, and less obvious, is the construal or social definition problem to be dealt with in more general terms in our next chapter. That is, to the extent that there is ambiguity either about the nature of the situation or the nature of the appropriate response to that situation, the failure of other people to act serves to support interpretations or construals that are consistent with nonintervention ("it must just be a



domestic dispute," or "she must not be hurt as badly or be in as much danger as she seems,"; or alternatively, "I guess this must be one of those situations where it's inappropriate, maybe even dangerous, to get involved, the kind of situation that prudent and sophisticated people steer clear of!"). In a sense, a vicious circle is initiated. The presence of other people inhibits quick intervention, and that initial lack of intervention supports definitions of the situation that make intervention seem unnecessary, unwise, or inappropriate, which in turn prompts further reluctance and delays, and so forth. By contrast, if the bystander is alone, and there is no one else to share the responsibility to intervene or to help define the situation, this vicious cycle never begins.

Darley and Latané undertook a number of studies to confirm the strongest version of this hypothesis—that is, that a victim's chances of receiving help would be greater if there were only a single bystander available than if there were a whole group of such bystanders. In one study (Latané & Darley, 1968), male undergraduates at Columbia were left to fill out a questionnaire either by themselves, with two other subjects, or with two confederates of the experimenter instructed to remain impassive and continue working when the subsequent "emergency" occurred. This emergency consisted of a stream of "smoke" that began to pour into the room through a wall vent, eventually filling up the entire room. While 75 percent of the solitary bystanders left the room to report the smoke, only 10 percent of the bystanders who participated alongside the two impassive confederates, and only 38 percent of the three-person groups, ever intervened in this way.

In another Columbia study (Latané & Rodin, 1969), individuals working alone on a questionnaire, individuals working in the presence of an impassive confederate, or dyads consisting of two naive subjects, heard what they believed was the sound of the female experimenter taking a bad fall on the other side of a movable room divider. Once again, most of the solitary bystanders (70 percent), but very few of the bystanders who sat next to an impassive confederate (7 percent), intervened to offer assistance. It also turned out that the victim would have fared better if she had been at the mercy of a lone bystander (70 percent intervention) than a pair of strangers (40 percent intervention).

Finally, in a New York University study (Darley & Latané, 1968), subjects heard someone whom they believed to be a fellow participant in an experiment feign an epileptic seizure while talking to them over an intercom system. When subjects believed they were the only listener, 85 percent intervened; when they believed that there was one other listener, 62 percent intervened, and when they believed that there were four other listeners, 31 percent intervened. Furthermore (as in both of the studies we've discussed previously), subjects who believed themselves to be the only potential intervener offered help more quickly. Indeed, by the end of the first minute of the feigned seizure, 50

percent of the solitary listeners, but none of those believing themselves to be only one of five listeners, had come to the assistance of the victim.

By 1980, four dozen follow-up studies had been undertaken—some using feigned emergencies in the confines of the laboratory, others exposing unwitting bystanders to simulated accidents, illnesses, or thefts, occurring in the streets, stores, elevators, and subway cars. And in about 90 percent of the comparisons, lone bystanders proved more likely to help than did people in groups (Latané & Nida, 1981). Moreover, as Darley and Latané had found in their seminal studies in the late 1960s, the victim's overall chances of receiving assistance often proved to be better if there was only a single bystander to rely upon than if there were many.

Follow-up interviews with subjects have also served to confirm the hunch that potential intervention situations, if at all ambiguous, are construed differently by group members than by lone bystanders. Potentially dangerous smoke pouring through a vent was interpreted as a leak in the air-conditioning or as vapors from a chemistry lab. Cries and moans of an accident victim became complaints and curses of someone who had probably suffered a mild sprain. The prospect of intervening now became "barging in," perhaps to the embarrassment of all concerned. Interestingly, it also appears that group situations may have inhibited subjects from noticing the emergency in the first place. Solitary students in the "smoke study" tended to glance around the room frequently as they worked on their questionnaires, generally noticing the smoke within 5 seconds. Those in groups typically kept their eyes on their work and didn't notice the smoke until it was quite thick—about 20 seconds after the first puff came through the vent.

The lesson of the Darley and Latané studies is not a difficult one to grasp, but it is sometimes hard to remember in the face of tales of "big city" life. In the movie *Midnight Cowboy* a naive young man comes from the range to the streets of Manhattan. Just off the bus, and walking through great throngs of people, he comes across a man lying on the sidewalk. He starts to reach down to see what's wrong with the man, then looks around him at the people walking past. They steer around the man on the sidewalk as they might avoid a log lying on a trail. The young man expresses surprise, then consternation, then shrugs his shoulders and goes about his business like the others.

One cannot witness such a scene without being reminded of one's own experiences of apathy and indifference in the megalopolis. But it should be helpful to ask oneself if New Yorkers, or Bostonians, or Philadelphians seem any less moved than their compatriots in Sioux Falls, Iowa, by the sufferings of stray cats, or by the fate of miners trapped in cave-ins, or by the plight of an abused and neglected child, or by the struggle of a young athlete stricken with a deadly variety of cancer. In our experience the answer is no. People are no more callous about such

matters in one place than in another. To explain why urbanites walk around unfortunates lying in the street, or why they fail to investigate or call the police when they hear screams from an adjacent apartment, we need to look to the specifics of the relevant social situations, including, of course, the behavioral norms that are explicitly and implicitly communicated as these intervention opportunities continually present themselves.

### *Why Is Social Influence So Powerful?*

Why are people so much influenced by the attitudes and behavior of other people, even of other people whom they do not know and who have no control over their lives? Some of the most interesting theoretical work of the social sciences has centered on answering this question by disentangling informational and normative aspects of social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

**Informational aspects of social influence.** Other people are among our best sources of information about the world. If the animal in front of me appears to be a cat, then (almost surely) it is. But if the judgment in question is of some greater ambiguity than this, for example, how hard is this task I am about to undertake, or how capable am I of undertaking it, then the opinions of other people are usually valuable in arriving at a correct conclusion. If my opinion differs from yours, then I ought to consider yours simply on statistical grounds. Over the long haul, the average of the opinions of any two people is more likely to be correct than the opinion of either individual. To attend to the "base rate" of other people's opinions is only rational, and people who do this too little are aptly regarded as opinionated or reckless. Many of the experiments demonstrating dramatic social influence, including the Asch experiments, take advantage of this basic fact. We are not in the habit of ignoring the opinions of our fellows for the very good reason that they have proven in the past to be a helpful way of learning about the world. The state of disagreeing with others produces a discomfort that we need to resolve either by moving toward their position, moving them toward ours, or deciding that they are not a useful source of information for people who occupy our particular niche in the world.

An interesting implication of this derivation of conformity pressures is that it is not just majority opinions that should be influential, but minority opinions as well. Even if the holders of some view are not powerful, and not in the majority, their views are likely to have an influence on group opinions. And indeed, recent work by both Moscovici and his colleagues (Moscovici, Lage, & Naffrechoux, 1969; Moscovici & Personnaz, 1980) and Nemeth (1986) establishes that not all conformity

is to majority opinion. Minority views often have an influence even when this is quite unrecognized by the majority. Such views enter the marketplace of ideas and may ultimately win even in the face of seemingly overwhelming opposition—especially if such views are expressed consistently and confidently.

**Normative basis of social influence.** A second reason that we attend to the views of our fellows is that we understand that movement toward group goals depends on a degree of unanimity about understanding of the situation (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). If all of us have different views about what the task is to accomplish and how to accomplish it, if in fact we even have different understandings of the meanings of the events we encounter, then collaboration and effective action are difficult or impossible. Largely for this reason, the opinion of the majority carries normative or moral force: To get along, go along; hang together or hang separately. Thus groups are punitive toward their deviates in part because they block group movement. Knowing that our disagreement can bring the wrath of our fellows, it is with great hesitation that we risk it. Better to yield in the interest of harmony, and fight only if sober reflection demands it.

**Social influence and tension systems.** As we noted in Chapter 1, the major theoretical treatments of social influence, especially those of Festinger (1954) and his fellow theorists (see Cartwright & Zander, 1953) are heavily influenced by Kurt Lewin's notions of tension systems. This is true both at the level of the group and at the level of the individual psyche.

Groups should be thought of as being in a constant state of tension produced on the one hand by requirements of uniformity and, on the other, by forces operating on individual group members that cause them to stray from the group standard. Individuals will have different sources of information about important topics and will construe this information in various ways. This will produce opinion deviance, which will be met with forces toward uniformity by the group. The group forces are toward an entropic, static state in which there is complete uniformity of opinion. Yet events and personalities will constantly be producing divergence from that state. When the divergence is great enough, the forces toward uniformity may actually produce fission of the group. Groups can tolerate only so much deviance with respect to important issues, and when the deviance exceeds that level, groups may socially reject, sometimes even officially expel, deviant members or subgroups (Schachter, 1951).

Individuals may also be thought of as tension systems in regard to their conflicts with the group standard. When one discovers a discrepancy between the group norm and one's own view, this creates a ten-

sion that must be resolved in one of three ways—influencing the group toward one's own views, opening oneself to influence so as to move one's view in line with that of the group, or rejecting the group as a standard for one's own opinions. In the event that it does not prove possible to move the group toward one's own view *and* the group is less than convincing on informational grounds *and* one is unwilling to reject the group, there is a powerful kind of tension recognized by many theorists of the 1950s, including Heider, Newcomb, and Festinger. Festinger called this tension "cognitive dissonance," a concept that he ultimately broadened to include tension produced by a variety of cases in which different sources pulled attitudes in different directions. In the case of social influence, the dissonance exists between one's own view and the views (as well as the conformity requirements) of the group. This dissonance is characteristically resolved in favor of the group's view, often not by simple compromise, but by wholesale adoption of the group's view and suppression of one's own doubts. The consequences of this sort of dissonance reduction are revealed in Irving Janis's (1982) well-known analysis of disastrous military and political decisions resulting from "groupthink." That is, loyal group members suppress their doubts about a planned course of action, thereby giving an illusion of consensus that in turn discourages believers and doubters alike from exploring flaws in the proposal and considering alternatives.

The tension system notion should be kept in mind as we consider the notion of channel factors in the next section. Channel factors are important because they release or redirect the energy in delicately balanced systems where there is tension between one or more motive states. Just which behavioral route, or which attitudinal state, is chosen is sometimes observed to be under the control of remarkably slight situational variations.

## CHANNEL FACTORS

So far we have focused on one aspect of situationism—the power of various circumstances to elicit behavior that is surprising. The other face of situationism, implicit in much of the previous discussion, is that small differences between situations often are associated with very large behavioral differences. When we find an apparently small situational circumstance producing a big behavioral effect, we are justified in suspecting we have identified a channel factor, that is, a stimulus or a response pathway that serves to elicit or sustain behavioral intentions with particular intensity or stability. We now review three classic studies illustrating how channel factors can either facilitate or inhibit the links between general attitudes or vague intentions on the one hand and consequential social actions on the other. In each study, as we will

see, the point is not simply that the relevant environmental manipulations produced significant change in some dependent variable measure; rather, it is the fact that the relevant effects were large and consequential—large relative to our expectations, large relative to individual difference factors that laypeople normally would expect to be the most important determinants of the behavior under investigation, and too large to be ignored by anyone whose goal is successful social intervention.

## On Selling War Bonds

During World War II the U.S. government initiated a number of mass persuasion campaigns designed to encourage the purchase of war bonds to pay for the enormous cost of military operations. Social psychologists were asked to help increase the effectiveness of these campaigns, primarily by heightening the persuasiveness of the print, radio, and film appeals to the public. The Lewinian contribution to this effort took a somewhat different tack, one that proceeded from the insight that social influence depends not just on persuading people to hold particular beliefs, or even to develop particular intentions, but also on facilitating a specific, well-defined path or channel for action (Cartwright, 1949).

In concrete terms, this meant a change from relatively general appeals ("Buy War Bonds") to a more specific appeal ("Buy an *extra* \$100 Bond"), and a stipulated time and place for doing so (for example, "Buy them when the solicitor at your workplace asks you to sign up"). The result, substantially because of this change in appeals (so Cartwright tells us), was a doubling of bond sales (from 25 percent of all wage earners to 50 percent). Perhaps most striking of all was the importance of direct personal requests. Although virtually all Americans heard the appeals and agreed that such purchases were desirable, and virtually all could name places where bonds could be bought (for example, at their bank or post office), fewer than 20 percent of wage earners purchased additional bonds in the absence of a direct, face-to-face appeal. By contrast, when asked to purchase another bond by someone who could sign them up on the spot, almost 60 percent put their names on the dotted line.

This lesson about the importance of channel factors has come to be appreciated more and more by contemporary persuaders. Increasingly, charities and businesses rely on direct telephone or door-to-door solicitations that force you to say yes or no, right there, without allowing you to consider the merits of their cause relative to others (or, more importantly, to turn your attention to other concerns without making any real decision at all). The increasing number of charity telethons offers another illustration. The telethon will, of course, prominently feature

information about the disease or problem needing attention; and appeals that tug at the heartstrings and motivate you to care and to act will not be neglected. But the most distinctive and ubiquitous feature of the telethon is apt to be the single telephone number on the screen, and the continual plea from the heroic telethon host who looks you in the eye and urges you to "call that number now and make a pledge to our volunteers." Once you take that initial step by making the phone call, they take care of everything. In other words, they create a behavioral channel that very reliably transforms a long-standing but vague intention, or even a momentary whim, into a completed donation.

Christian evangelists show a similar sensitivity to the importance of channel factors. Instead of a vague and general appeal to change one's ways or to accept Christ as one's personal savior, the evangelist asks for a single concrete act at that exact moment in time, for example, to get out of one's seat and come forward as a sign of one's decision (after which a cadre of volunteers will lead the newcomers backstage and induce further acts of commitment). Successful evangelists, it is worth noting parenthetically, do not always rely only on channel facilitation. Some also make effective use of social influence techniques consistent with the message of the first half of this chapter. In particular, they employ models—explicitly instructed volunteers who immediately stand in response to the evangelist's appeal, thereby "getting the ball rolling" and making it more normative for others to rise to their feet (and, eventually, rather uncomfortable to remain seated).

### *Time to Be a Good Samaritan*

We have already discussed the Darley and Latané demonstration that one apparently trivial feature of the social setting—the presence or absence of other people—can markedly influence bystander intervention. In a later study that we sketched in Chapter 1, Darley and Batson (1973) showed that another, seemingly even less consequential, feature of the social situation could exert almost as much influence on the potential bystander. Their experiment, they tell us, was inspired by the Good Samaritan parable, whereby the priest and the Levite, both important (and presumably busy) people, hurry by a stricken traveler leaving it for the lowly (and presumably far less busy) Samaritan to offer the necessary assistance. Reflecting on this parable, and deriving a decidedly situationist message from it, Darley and Batson decided to manipulate the "hurried" versus "unhurried" status of potential "Good Samaritans"—all of whom, by no means coincidentally, were students at Princeton Theological Seminary.

In an initial phase of the experiment, the young seminarians were told that they were to prepare themselves for a brief extemporaneous

talk (which, for half of the participants, was on the Good Samaritan parable itself) to be recorded in a nearby building. After receiving directions from the experimenter, the seminarians in one condition were told "you're late; they were expecting you a few minutes ago, so you'd better hurry," while in the other condition they were told "it will be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over." En route, the participants in both the "late" and "early" condition came upon a man slumped in a doorway, head down, coughing and groaning. As predicted, the late seminarians seldom helped; in fact, only 10 percent offered any assistance. By contrast, with ample time on their hands, 63 percent of the early participants helped.

Does this study prove that these seminarians were indifferent to worldly suffering, or that they placed the interests of the relatively high-status people waiting for them ahead of the lowly character who seemed to need their help? By now the reader should be able to anticipate that we think that these findings tell us little if anything about the personal dispositions of seminarians but a great deal about the situational determinants of altruism. Once again, incidentally, we suspect that some of the subtler details of the situational manipulation may have been important and would merit some emphasis. We suspect that the "late" manipulation employed by Darley and Batson not only made the young seminarians reluctant to stop, it also guaranteed that they would feel a little harried and nervous about their forthcoming talk—enough so, perhaps, to prevent them from paying attention to the victim. On the other hand, the "early" manipulation may have served to make the young seminarians walk more slowly, contemplate their surroundings more closely, and perhaps even welcome an excuse to tarry (rather than having to wait around awkwardly while the anonymous "they" got everything ready).

In Chapter 5 we will show that such situational influences tend to be far greater than most people are willing to predict. We can also note that scores of studies have probed additional situational determinants of altruistic behavior (and quite a few have looked for the personality characteristics of the altruist). The results of some of these studies have been fairly intuitive. Bryan and Test (1967), for example, showed that the presence or absence of altruistic "models" (peers who rendered the sought-after assistance in similar or identical circumstances) produced corresponding increases or decreases both in subjects' willingness to help motorists in distress and in their generosity when faced with a Salvation Army collection kettle. Other studies have produced more surprising, and often more complicated, results: For example, many studies have shown that mood inductions, either of "guilt" (Carlsmith & Gross, 1968) or "happiness" (Isen, Clark, & Schwartz, 1976; Isen, Shaker, Clark, & Karp, 1978) can markedly increase subjects' willingness to comply with requests for help or to show other altruistic behav-

iors. But none, we believe, can drive home the situationist message in general, and the importance of channel factors in particular, as pointedly as Darley and Batson's simple study. As we contemplate the earnest young seminarian (who, no doubt, has devoted in the past and will devote again in the future many hours to helping various types of unfortunates) almost literally stepping over a distressed victim as he hurries off to preach his sermonette on Good Samaritanism, we grasp an essential message of the Lewinian tradition: There but for the sake of a facilitating channel factor go we.

### *Effects of Minimal Compliance*

The situationist perspective suggests social influence strategies quite different from the conventional approach of presenting persuasive appeals that address cognitive and motivational concerns. One of the most potent strategies, it has become apparent, consists of inducing people to take initial small, seemingly inconsequential steps along a path that ultimately will lead them to take much larger and more consequential actions. All of us, in fact, have had personal experiences that illustrate the relevant principle. We agree to help someone in some limited way or to undertake some small responsibility. But one thing somehow leads to another, and before we know it, we find ourselves deeply involved and reluctantly (occasionally, even willingly) devoting far more time, money, or energy to the endeavor than we ever had intended, ever would have predicted, or ever would have agreed to before becoming involved.

The principle in question, when applied by a skilled interpersonal manipulator, consists of first getting one's "foot in the door," that is, asking for a small favor or commitment (one that, in the context at hand, can scarcely be refused), and only then asking for the larger commitment or undertaking that constitutes the real objective. Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser (1966) illustrated this principle very elegantly in an experiment that has become a classic. Homemakers in a middle-class housing tract near the Stanford University campus were first approached by a person who asked them to do something relatively innocuous, that is, either to sign a petition or to place a small (3 inches square) sign in the window of their car or home promoting a noncontroversial cause (for example, safe driving). The vast majority of those approached, not surprisingly, agreed to this seemingly modest request. Two weeks later a second person visited the same sample of homemakers, and also called upon a control group sample who had not previously been contacted, to accede to a far more substantial, even rather unreasonable, request. He asked them to allow a large, crudely lettered, and decidedly ugly "Drive Carefully" sign to be installed di-

rectly in front of their house. As he made this request, he showed them a photo in which the ugly sign could be seen obscuring the front door of another house in the tract.

The results of this study were dramatic. Fully 76 percent of the subjects who had initially agreed to place a small auto safety sign in their window now agreed to place the big, ugly "Drive Carefully" sign in front of the house. By contrast, "only" 17 percent (actually, a surprisingly large percentage in absolute terms) agreed to erect the sign when there had been no prior foot-in-the-door visit. Interestingly, even when the issue pertinent to the subjects' initial compliance was irrelevant to the subsequent request (for example, when they initially had accepted a window sign, or signed a petition, that sought to "Keep California Beautiful"), the rate of compliance was close to 50 percent—almost three times the compliance rate in the control group.

Many subsequent studies have confirmed Freedman and Fraser's basic findings. For example, Patricia Pliner and her co-workers (Pliner, Hart, Kohl, & Saari, 1974) found that a sample of Toronto suburbanites became twice as likely to donate money to the Cancer Society after agreeing, a day earlier, to wear a lapel pin publicizing the forthcoming fund drive (an innocuous foot-in-the-door request that none refused). But the message of such studies should not be embraced too wholeheartedly. We know from subsequent research that not all big requests can be facilitated via foot-in-the-door techniques. In some circumstances (for example, when the initial request is large enough to make the individuals feel that they have "already done their share"), satisfying an initial request can make people more reluctant to comply with subsequent requests (Cann, Sherman, & Elkes, 1975; Snyder & Cunningham, 1974). By the same token, there are also circumstances in which people's refusal of an initial large request can render them easy prey to a second more moderate request—for example, when their refusal to aid a worthy cause motivates them to demonstrate, as soon as possible, that they are not hard-hearted or unreasonable (Cialdini et al., 1975). As always, contextual details, sometimes very subtle details, matter a great deal, and some talent (or better still, some pretesting) is required to figure out what kinds of initial requests are most likely to facilitate which kinds of later compliance. But the fact remains that careful use of initial commitments and other channel manipulations can lead people ultimately to take steps that no one, least of all they themselves, would have predicted from their previous behavior or from their previous expressions of their views.

Rather than attempting to offer any simple formula for using foot-in-the-door or other minimal compliance manipulations, we should consider briefly the explanation that researchers who employ them offer for their effectiveness. Basically, they argue either that the small acts of compliance motivate subjects to adopt attitudes consonant with such

behavior (Festinger, 1957) or that these acts help to "inform" the subjects about the nature and degree of their heretofore unexamined and untested views (Bem, 1972). Whether the subjects rationalize their prior behavior, or simply use it as a clue as to their real attitudes and priorities, the result is a subsequent willingness to act accordingly, for example, to make further commitments or take further actions appropriate for one who holds those attitudes. We think that these cognitive explanations are correct, at least in part, but we think it is also important to emphasize that such explanations really explain very little unless they tacitly grant one of the central contentions of this chapter and of our book as a whole: People are prone not only to be influenced by situational factors but also to underestimate the extent of such influence (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977). If they recognized that their compliance was elicited by situational pressures rather than freely chosen because it was consistent with their attitudes, they would not have to realign their attitudes to "sustain" the consistency.

### *Putting It All Together: Stanley Milgram and the Banality of Evil*

In 1965 the moral philosopher Hannah Arendt announced her thesis that the Holocaust, or at any rate its day-to-day implementation, owed more to bureaucratic blandness and indifference than to sadistic pleasure in the suffering of the innocent. She came to this conclusion after watching the trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann, the man charged with overseeing the transportation of Europe's Jewry to the death camps. What she saw in the docket (in the bulletproof glass cage, actually—Israeli security was determined that Eichmann not be assassinated before facing his accusers) was a pasty, balding, middle-aged man whose defense was that he was merely following orders, and that he never cared much one way or the other about what happened to the people he transported to the camps in central Europe. Arendt was willing to believe that Eichmann was not a sadistic monster but a conformist without a cause, that he could as easily have been in charge of shipping vegetables, or more to the point, that many a vegetable shipper could have been induced to play Eichmann's monstrous role.

We share the suspicions of the social critic Alfred Kazin (1984) that Arendt may have too readily accepted at face value the only defense left to a man who could not plausibly deny either that he was who he was or that he did what he did. "Just following orders" has always been the defense of underlings who commit evil deeds in the name of the state. At the same time, we cannot help commending Arendt's willingness to resist the easier and more commonplace conclusion that heinous acts must be the product of heinous motives. For, as we have emphasized,

the tendency to make unwarranted leaps from acts to corresponding dispositions is perhaps the most fundamental and most common failing of social inference. Whether Eichmann was a fiend, we do not know; that there were many Germans who were not fiends yet knowingly played a role in sending the victims of Nazism to their horrible fates, we do not doubt. It is certainly the case that many Nazi concentration camp guards led blameless lives, both before and after their horrible service (Steiner, 1980). To explain such complicity, therefore, we must assume the existence of a specific social and situational context that could induce ordinary people to commit extraordinarily evil deeds.

As it happens, at roughly the same time Arendt was developing her thesis about the banality of evil, Stanley Milgram was demonstrating it in his laboratory. As we described earlier, Milgram had previously done follow-up work on the Asch paradigm showing that people would conform to a unanimous majority even when they thought that they were testing airliner signaling systems. He had then gone on, using the same paradigm, to study cultural differences in conformity (and, in fact, to provide some support for the ethnic stereotype that the "contentious" French would show less conformity than the "more retiring" Scandinavians). These results, in turn, made Milgram wonder whether similar cultural differences would be manifested when the conforming response involved a potentially harmful action.

It was with this goal in mind that Milgram contrived the situation that now bears his name, a situation that originally was designed to be a "control" condition (in which people merely would be asked by the experimenter to do something that would presumably harm another person). This situation was intended to present no conformity pressures, but it nevertheless featured some very potent situational forces. In fact, the results of some pilot work using this situation to test ordinary Americans, a people supposedly rich in a cultural tradition of independence and distaste for authority, quickly switched Milgram's attention from conformity to obedience.

Milgram's subjects came from all walks of life. They were not impressionable college sophomores; rather (at least in his best-known studies), they were adult males of varied occupations who had responded to a newspaper advertisement soliciting participants for a study on learning to be conducted at Yale University. Let us now consider the details of Milgram's unfolding experimental scenario.

Upon their arrival, Milgram's subject meets another "subject," a pleasant-mannered, middle-aged man (who, unknown to him, is actually a confederate of the experimenter). The experimenter announces his interest in the effects of punishment on learning. He draws slips of paper from a hat to determine who will be the "teacher" and who the "learner" (a drawing rigged to make sure that the subject becomes the teacher and the confederate becomes the learner). The teacher's job, it

is explained, will be to teach a series of word pairs to the learner. The teacher then watches as the learner is strapped into an electric-chair apparatus (to "prevent excessive movement," the experimenter explains). An electrode is taped to the man's wrist and electrode paste is applied to the skin (to "prevent burns").

The experimenter explains that the electrode is attached to a shock generator, and that the teacher's specific task will be to administer shocks to the learner (by pushing switches on the shock generator) every time the learner makes a mistake in recalling a word. The teacher is then led into an adjacent room, out of sight of the learner, and seated in front of the shock generator. On the generator, the teacher sees 30 lever switches, labeled in 15-volt increments from 15 to 450 volts, with accompanying descriptions of the intensities of shock, ranging from "slight shock" to "danger: severe shock." The last two switches, ominously, are labeled "XXX." The experimenter tells the teacher that he is to increase the shock level by 15 volts every time the learner gives a wrong answer. He assures the subjects that "although the shocks can be extremely painful, they cause no permanent tissue damage." The experimenter remains by the teacher's side, where he stays throughout the experiment that follows.

As the scenario unfolds, the learner indicates his answers by choosing from a list of four words and pressing a button that lights up one of four signals at the top of the teacher's shock generator. After the learner's first mistake, the teacher increases the shock 15 volts, then another 15, and so on. The teacher's dilemma is heightened by the "feedback" he receives from the hapless learner. Initially, there are only verbal protests about the painfulness of the shocks, but the learner continues to participate. Then, when the shock level reaches 300 volts, the learner pounds on the wall in protest, and from this point on, no answers from the learner appear on the panel display in front of the teacher. The learner does, however, continue pounding after each shock is administered. Then even the pounding ceases.

Throughout the procedure the experimenter restates the teacher's duties. If the teacher looks to the experimenter for guidance, the experimenter says, "Please continue." If the teacher protests that the learner is no longer giving answers, the experimenter states that the failure to answer should be considered a wrong answer. If the teacher expresses a reluctance to continue or suggests that the learner's condition should be examined, the experimenter merely insists that "the experiment requires that you continue." If the teacher becomes really insistent, the experimenter announces, "you have no choice; you must go on." And if (but only if) the subject protests that he will not accept responsibility for harm that might be done to the learner, the experimenter assures him that "the responsibility is mine."

As all students of introductory psychology know (indeed, as most educated people in the Western world know, for Milgram's demonstrations have become part of our society's shared intellectual legacy; see Ross, 1988), this grim protocol was generally carried out to its conclusion. Most people (68 percent in the best-known variation) obeyed to the bitter end, beyond the "danger: severe shock" level, all the way to the final "450-volt, XXX" level.

This result confounded Milgram's own expectations and those of everyone else. Laypeople, social psychologists, and psychiatrists whom Milgram consulted all assured him that virtually no one would reach the highest levels of shock. The question that arose then, and that remains today, is why so many people obeyed so completely (or, alternatively, why so few people predicted the correct result). Even today we cannot read the results of Milgram's experiment without feeling that we have learned something very dire about our society in particular and the human species in general. We find ourselves concluding that people are not only sheep (as Asch's earlier demonstration had suggested) but that they are also weaklings who cannot stand up to authority or, even worse, that they have a sadistic streak just waiting to show itself.

Some people react to Milgram's results with the reassuring conclusion that the subjects must have seen through the hoax and realized that the victim was not really being shocked. After all, "anyone" would know a respected institution like Yale would "never allow such a thing to happen." Milgram anticipated such objections, and he was determined that his results not be so easily dismissed. Accordingly, he replicated his study using a shabby office in a rundown section of Bridgeport, Connecticut—this time under the uninspiring aegis of an unknown "Research Institute." The dropoff in obedience proved to be relatively slight. He also took pains to invite skeptical social scientists to watch his procedure from behind a one-way mirror. All were shaken by what they saw, not only by the levels of obedience they observed but, frequently, also by the human anguish that accompanied it. As one scientist reported:

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: "Oh God, let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end. (Milgram, 1963, p. 377)

Such reports not only allow us to dismiss the possibility that Milgram's subjects were merely going along with the experimenter's charade, they also allow us to discredit the potential explanation that peo-



ple in this age of urban anonymity don't care what they do to strangers. The vast majority of Milgram's subjects, it seems clear, believed that what was happening was real, and most of them found it an agonizing experience. So why didn't they stop? Why didn't they just tell the experimenter where to go?

The answer appears to be that it was certain subtle features of Milgram's situation—whose influence tends to be unrecognized or underappreciated by all who read about or even personally witnessed that situation—that prompted ordinary members of our society to behave so extraordinarily. We cannot claim to have identified all these features, or to understand exactly how and why they interacted to produce so potent an effect, but we can outline a few of them which, not coincidentally, turn out to be some of the same situational influences and channel factors that we have discussed for other studies.

Milgram's own analysis began with the subject's implicit contract to do as one is told without asking why, faithfully serving the authority figure to whom one has willingly ceded responsibility. His analysis also stresses the gradual, stepwise character of the shift from relatively unobjectionable behavior to complicity in a pointless, cruel, and dangerous ordeal. The teacher, it must be remembered, did not obey a single, simple command to deliver a powerful shock to an innocent victim. At first, all he undertook to do was to deliver mild punishments—feedback really—to a learner who had willingly agreed to receive such feedback as an aid in performing his task. He also agreed, as did the learner, to a specific punishment procedure (that is, increasing the punishments by a fixed amount after each error), without ever imagining the full consequences of that agreement. It was only as the stepwise progression continued, and the shocks being administered reached alarming levels, that the teacher's psychological dilemma became apparent. In a sense, the teacher had to find a rationale (one satisfactory to himself, to the experimenter, and perhaps even to the learner) that would justify his decision to desist now when he hadn't desisted earlier, a way to explain why it was illegitimate to deliver the next shock when it presumably had been legitimate to deliver one of only slightly lesser magnitude just moments before. Such a rationale is difficult to find. Indeed, it is clearly available at only one point in the proceedings—the point at which the learner stops responding and thereby withdraws his implied consent to receive the shocks—and, significantly, it is at precisely this point that refusals to obey were most frequent.

There are also some additional, less obvious, features of the Milgram demonstration that we must recognize if we are to appreciate the subjects' view of their situation and their own behavior. In particular, it is important to note that relatively few of Milgram's subjects simply obeyed from beginning to end without ever questioning their orders or expressing any unwillingness to continue. While Milgram's research re-

ports were not as precise as they should have been on this crucial issue, it is apparent that most participants did step outside the role of "obedient subject" to question the experimenter's wisdom in continuing, to urge the experimenter to check on the learner's condition, or to express their own reluctance. In fact, many subjects essentially said "I quit," only to be confronted with perhaps the most important yet subtle feature of the Milgram paradigm, the difficulty in moving from the intention to discontinue to the actual termination of their participation. Most of the subjects did confront the experimenter and even refused to continue, often quite forcefully. But nearly always they were backed down by the experimenter. ("The experiment requires that you continue." "You have no choice.") Indeed, the Milgram experiments ultimately may have less to say about "destructive obedience" than about ineffectual, and indecisive, disobedience.

A thought experiment will be helpful here. Suppose that the experimenter had announced at the beginning of the session that, if at any time the teacher wished to terminate his participation in the experiment, he could indicate his desire to do so by pressing a button on the table in front of him. We trust the reader agrees with us that if this channel factor had been opened up, the obedience rate would have been a fraction of what it was. The converse of this is that the absence of such a "disobedience channel" is precisely what condemned Milgram's subjects to their hapless behavior. In Lewinian terms, there was no well-defined, legitimate, channel that the teacher could use to escape from the situation and discontinue participation in the experiment; and any attempt to create such a channel was met with implacable opposition from an experimenter who, significantly, never even acknowledged the legitimacy of the teacher's concerns.

There is yet one more, still subtler and more elusive feature of the Milgram situation that may have been very important from the subject's viewpoint. The events that unfolded did not "make sense" or "add up" from the perspective of the subject. The subject's task was that of administering severe electric shocks to a learner who was no longer attempting to learn anything, at the insistence of an experimenter who seemed totally oblivious to the learner's cries of anguish, warnings about a heart condition, refusal to continue responding, and ultimately, ominous silence. What's more; the experimenter evinced no concern about this turn of events, made no attempt to explain or justify that lack of concern or, alternatively, to explain why it was so necessary for the experiment to continue. He even refused to "humor" the subject by checking on the condition of the learner. Unless subjects grasped both the nature of the deception and the real purpose of the experiment (in which case, presumably, they would have chosen to disobey in order to prove that they were not the sort to carry out evil orders in stolid, Eichmann-like fashion), there was simply no way for them to arrive at a

stable "definition of the situation." And how does one respond when "nothing seems to make sense," when one's own understanding of the actions and outcomes unfolding around one obviously is limited or deficient? Few people, we suggest, would respond by acting decisively or asserting independence. Rather, they would become uncharacteristically indecisive, unwilling and unable to challenge authority or disavow role expectations, and highly dependent on those who calmly and confidently issue orders. In short, they would behave very much like Milgram's subjects.

We trust that the point of this detailed analysis of the Milgram demonstration is clear. We do not find evidence in Milgram's research that people are disposed to obey authority figures unquestioningly—even to the point of committing harmful and dangerous acts. (We've never found such slavish obedience forthcoming from the students or advisees whom we enjoin to keep up to date with their reading, take neat lecture notes, and to study for exams in an orderly and timely fashion—and it is not because they do not regard us as authority figures.) Rather, what Milgram offered was a pointed reminder about the capacity of particular, relatively subtle situational forces to overcome people's kinder dispositions. He also showed how readily the observer makes erroneous inferences about the actor's destructive obedience (or foolish conformity) by taking the behavior at face value and presuming that extreme personal dispositions are at fault. His studies also remind us that the task of understanding and interpreting behavior must begin with an attempt to appreciate the actor's understanding of the situation. It is therefore appropriate that our next chapter proceeds to consider general questions of situational construal.